



# CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS & THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

---

IN SURVEYS OF OVER 1,500 CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS EMPLOYED IN CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTIONS DURING THE BEGINNING OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, WE FOUND THAT CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS HAVE EXPERIENCED A GREAT DEAL OF STRESS AND DIFFICULTY ACCESSING RESOURCES TO REDUCE THE TRANSMISSION OF COVID-19. IN ADDITION, OUR RESULTS SUGGEST THAT MANY CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS NEED ADDITIONAL SERVICES THAT SUPPORT THEIR BASIC NEEDS DURING THIS TIME, SUCH AS IMPROVED FOOD OPTIONS, A PLACE TO CHANGE OR WASH CLOTHES, TUTORING FOR CHILDREN, AND PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.

## The challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc throughout California, including within the walls of the state's overcrowded prisons and jails. The virus has taken a massive toll not only on incarcerated individuals, but also the staff employed by these institutions.

While COVID-related policies have targeted strategies to curb the drivers of COVID-19 spread, there has been less focus on the additional occupational stressors that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought. Understanding the unique challenges faced by correctional officers, as well as the resources needed by correctional staff, is critical to preventing further transmission of COVID-19.

## What we did

In partnership with the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA), we set out to better understand how COVID-19 has affected correctional staff. Our goal was to determine how the COVID-19 outbreak has impacted California correctional officers, and what resources are required to help them through this crisis, both personally and professionally.



We conducted an online survey of officers between May and July 2020. Out of the nearly 20,000 officers working in adult prisons, we received 1,761 responses. Though the response rate is low (9%), we gathered a broadly representative sample based on race and gender, and had participants from every correctional institution.

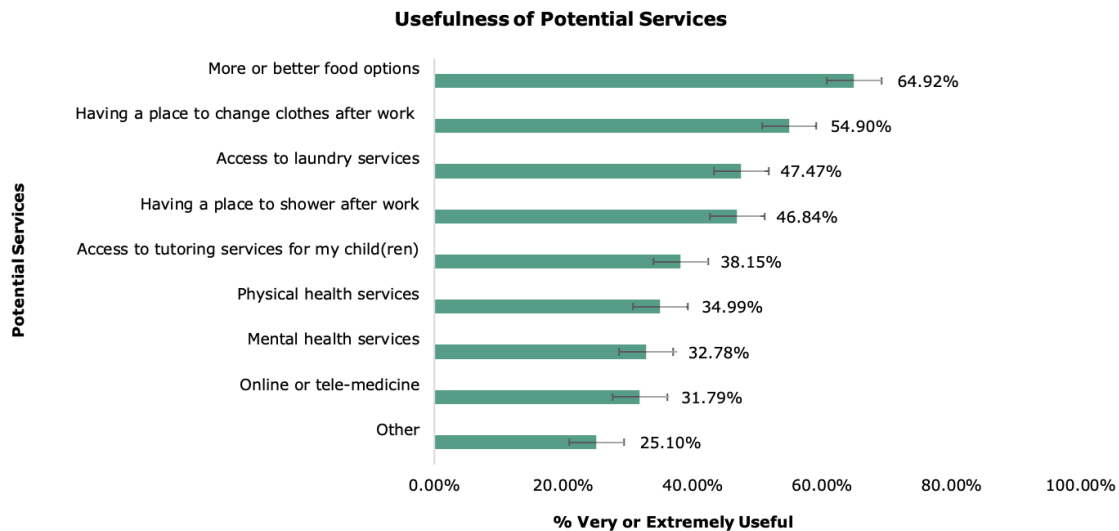
We asked officers employed within the state's adult correctional institutions a number of questions about work-related and personal stress, access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and other resources, and perceptions of safety at work. Additionally, we asked correctional officers questions designed to gauge support for policies to help reduce virus transmission.

## Our findings

We found that a majority of officers have experienced greater difficulty accessing adequate childcare, ensuring the safety of their loved ones, maintaining financial stability, and managing stress at home during the pandemic. Like other essential workers, the virus has impacted their work life. More than half of our respondents indicated that COVID-19 has made it harder to protect their health at work and to facilitate programs for incarcerated individuals.

Our results also demonstrated that managing COVID-19 in prisons has been exceedingly difficult. While access to PPE was widespread (83.6%), it was by no means ubiquitous. Moreover, of the 25% of officers who had tried to get tested for COVID-19, more than two in five were unable to do so. Of the 13.3% that were able to get tested, 11.0% had a positive result for COVID-19 and an additional 15.2% were unsure of their result.

Of particular concern was that a substantial proportion of officers (39.8%) reported feeling that they would need to go to work even if they were experiencing symptoms of an illness, given existing policies related to pay and sick leave. When asked about what services they would make use of if available, about one in three officers indicated that additional mental and physical health services would be very or extremely useful to them right now, but far greater proportions expressed a desire for resources to help reduce the risk of virus transmission, including access to showers or a place to wash/change clothes after work.



## Next steps

Our findings highlight the need for urgent policy changes, some of which have already been acted upon by the state (i.e., increased availability of PPE and access to testing for correctional staff). Additionally, our findings suggest that investments in support for officers' basic needs could prove especially valuable, as many indicated they would make use of them. These resources could not only have substantial benefits to public health, but might also help state policymakers signal concern for officers' well-being. This could help rebuild trust between officers and the state's political and policy actors.

Further research should focus on the long-run impacts of COVID-19 on the correctional workforce. Understanding the long-term impacts of the virus outbreak on officers (e.g., burdens on mental and physical health, as well as turnover) is key to addressing the impact of the pandemic. Additionally, as the nation proceeds with distribution of the vaccine, addressing hesitancy towards uptake among both staff and incarcerated individuals will be crucial. The People Lab is currently developing a set of randomized controlled trials aimed at these issues.



## Additional resources

View media coverage:

- [Correctional officers at high risk for depression, PTSD, suicide, survey finds](#)
- [For corrections officers and cops, a new emphasis on mental health](#)

Read more about our work:

- [Project page](#)

Related research on the correctional workforce:

- [The Pandemic in Prison: Implications for California Politics and Policymaking](#)
- [Feedback Effects and the Criminal Justice Bureaucracy: Officer Attitudes and the Future of Correctional Reform](#)

## ABOUT US

The People Lab aims to transform the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people in government and the communities they serve. We collaborate with governments and other stakeholders to evaluate strategies that can strengthen the public-sector workforce, improve public service delivery, and foster an engaged democracy. Our team brings together public management scholars, behavioral economists, political scientists and public policy experts who are committed to evidence-based policy making, and who use rigorous quantitative, qualitative, and experimental methods to better understand what works. All projects are co-designed with our partners to ensure feasibility and scalability.